

A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Montreal; A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Toronto; A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver

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Book Review Essay

Essai de compte rendu de livre

S. HOLYCK HUNCHUCK

Review of

Dutton, Nancy and Helen Malkin. 2008. *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Montreal*. Vancouver, Toronto and Berkley: Douglas and McIntyre.

Pp. 192, black and white illustrations, colour photographs, image credits, maps, indices, timeline, list of architectural firms, preface, afterword, paper, ISBN 978-1-55365-346-2, \$24.95.¹

Goodfellow, Margaret and Phil Goodfellow. 2010. *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Toronto*. Vancouver, Toronto and Berkley: Douglas and McIntyre.

Pp. 192, black and white illustrations, colour photographs, image credits, maps, indices, timeline, list of architectural firms, preface, afterword, paper, ISBN 978-1-55365-444-5 paper, \$24.95.

MacDonald, Chris in collaboration with Veronica Gillies. 2010. *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver*. Vancouver, Toronto and Berkley: Douglas and McIntyre.

Pp. 192, black and white illustrations, colour photographs, image credits, maps, indices, timeline, list of architectural firms, preface, afterword, paper, ISBN 978-1-55365-445-2 paper \$24.95.

This series of three books published over a two-year span from 2008 to 2010 represent a potentially noteworthy event in the historiography of Canadian material culture. Together, the authors—architects and architectural curators, professors and journalists—could have significantly advanced public awareness and understanding of some of the recent changes to the built environment of Canada’s three largest cities. As Dutton and Malkin, architectural consultants, curators and educators write in *Montreal*, “People who like to look at buildings like nothing more than being turned loose on a city with a good guidebook” (2008: 9). While that may be true in general, in the case of these books, their sentiment is overly optimistic. The series appears to be less about guiding readers to understand new buildings and their places in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, and more about the business of promoting real estate development in the three

cities—albeit with a veneer of intellection and within graphically beautiful packaging.

The best thing that can be said about the books is the way they look. Graphic designer George Vaitkaunas of Montreal is art director for the series, and his work is superb. The books are slender and pocket-sized, with an attractive pearl finish to the heavy-stock pages. Their visual appeal is aided by Vaitkaunas’s artistic sensibility; the layout is clean and minimal with sans-serif typefaces and generous margins around the text. Each volume also contains fold-out maps and architectural timelines enclosed within the front and back covers.² These simple graphic devices, too, are elegantly rendered, with modernist typography and muted colour palettes. The architectural photography, by diverse sources too numerous to list here, is also of very high quality throughout, although they are primarily publicity stills created by the design firms in question at the time of project completion.³

The built environment affects all the senses but planners and designers think predominantly in pictorial terms; the primary impact is most often visual. Therefore, the aesthetic quality of guidebooks on architectural and garden design would not normally pose a problem for a reader. In this series, however, the care and skill devoted to the books' visual appearance is repeatedly at odds with their textual content. Additionally, the content and provenance of the photographs raise ethical concerns, which will be discussed in detail below.

Each volume is arranged according to a seemingly straightforward literary template as set out in the first book, *Montreal*, co-authored by Nancy Dunton and Helen Malkin (who also act as the series editors): a portfolio depicting sixty or so buildings (and occasionally gardens) forms its central core. The didactic strategy here is simple, limited, but effective. Each site is described in a double-page entry, in which a full-page photograph occupies one page, while the opposite contains a textual description in the form of a detailed, point-form caption followed by a couple of contextual paragraphs. *Toronto*'s co-authors are Margaret Goodfellow and Philip Goodfellow (a worker in the development industry and an architect, respectively), while *Vancouver* comes from Chris MacDonald, an architect and professor at the University of British Columbia's School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (SALA) "in collaboration with"⁴ Veronica Gillies, a staff member of the British Columbia Institute of Architects.

In each volume, the central portfolios are bracketed by a preface and an afterword on the overall state of architecture within that city, courtesy of additional writers: *Montreal* by architects and professors Georges Adamczyk (l'école d'architecture at l'Université du Montréal) and Ricardo L. Castro (School of Architecture, McGill University), respectively; popular writer and trade-paper journalist, Vancouverite Adele Weder, along with Mathew Soules, an architect and Professor at UBC's SALA author them for *Vancouver*. *Toronto*'s preface is slightly different, being a pastiche interview by Margaret Goodfellow of separate encounters with three figures active in that city's design scene: architect Bruce Kuwabara, University of Toronto architecture professor, Larry Richards, and journalist-turned-Chief Executive Officer of the Royal Ontario Museum (retired), William Thorsell. Its afterword comes from Shawn Micallef, an architectural Blogger and Twitterer who "lives,

writes, and does stuff in Toronto."⁵ Altogether thirteen writers of varying architecturally related backgrounds have been brought together in the three-volume series to state their views on the buildings and cities on display. With so many voices contributing thoughts on so many sites, it is perhaps too much to expect Dutton and Malkin as co-editors to marshal consistent standards from all contributors, but the quality of the prose differs so widely in style, tone, pertinence, intention and readability as to give pause.

The most useful words in the three books are to be consistently found in the point-form captions that face each building photograph. These list building name, address, client, design firm and date; they also note public accessibility and proximity to public transit. Such prose has its limits as literature per se, but these caption labels do impart information clearly, coherently and artlessly; in so doing, they are valuable for advancing basic architectural literacy. Dutton and Malkin are also able to translate these communication skills to a degree with the brief contextual descriptions that round out each of their *Montreal* entries—perhaps indicative of their experience as museum curators with experience in how to relay information to a general audience, without condescension or overly pretentious digressions. Their contributions make *Montreal*'s central portfolio the strongest of all three books, albeit with significant limitations to be discussed below. By contrast, the Goodfellows with the *Toronto* portfolio describe every new building with laudatory prose more typically found in newspaper advertising supplements than in architectural histories or city guidebooks. The boosterish tone is repeated by all three of the *Toronto* interviewees. Despite their expertise and varied backgrounds, Kuwabara, Richards and Thorsell all offer readers little more than cheerleading roles in describing new architecture in the city. In the process, each promotes his own role in advancing the "Toronto Renaissance" of monument-building that has characterized the past decade. As a result, *Toronto*'s preface conveys scant factual information about contemporary architecture in the city and reads instead as something of a three-part vanity project by the interviewees. Micallef's afterword, a selective and ahistorical summary of heritage conservation and neighbourhood revitalization movements in the city also reads as a little self-serving. He writes impressionistically, in the first person and with an emphasis on his own contributions to popular architectural discourse. As with his *Toronto* co-authors,

Micallef offers little sense of the historiographic context in which his work exists. Something is distinctly lacking when an essay (let alone a book) on the topic of Toronto architecture omits mention of any other contributors to the field. Perhaps this omission is not unintentional: A central reference for Torontonians interested in understanding the city's architectural heritage is *Toronto: No Mean City*, by architect, professor and heritage activist Eric Arthur. First published in 1964, and still in print in revised and expanded form almost forty years later, *No Mean City* has become something of a bible of city guidebooks.⁶ *A Guidebook to Contemporary Architecture in Toronto* does not fare well by comparison. For the reader familiar with Arthur's work, an inevitable question arises as to whether or not any of the entries in the new *Guidebook* could withstand a similar test of time.

Equally off-putting as *Toronto* are *Montreal's* preface and afterword, and virtually all of *Vancouver*. Material historians will have high hopes for *Montreal's* preface for, as noted on the inside back cover, Adamczyk's "particular interests are the city and the influence of material culture on contemporary society"—only to find that he writes about Montreal with as much unqualified boosterism as do the *Toronto* authors about that city, but with additional declarations that can generously be described as vague yet overly heroic. A critical reader may find Adamczyk's arguments to be so circular and insubstantial as to be next to meaningless. Montreal has a "strong sense of place that Montrealers feel" (15) ... because its architecture "is now well connected to 'Montrealness'" (21). His call for an urgent (presumably architectural) "re-conquest [of Montreal] by its residents" (17) offers neither examples of the city's "conquest" nor tactics and strategies for such a "re-conquest" campaign. His lengthy digression into defining "postmodernism" (16-17) is not only unclear, it is irrelevant, for it properly belongs in another book. What *Montreal* pointedly lacks, as do *Toronto* and *Vancouver*, are definitions of what the authors believe constitutes "contemporary" architecture in each city, as indicated in the very titles in the series. The absence of any such definition from all three books speaks of some very peculiar editorial decisions that run throughout them.

Castro's afterword in *Montreal* picks up the architectural discourse in a comparable off-putting manner, with an added tone of pomposity: "I feel placed in the position of an oracle, a Delphian Pythia, or a Roman Augur, as it were," are his open-

ing thoughts (183). Castro concludes *Montreal* with a declaration offered to the reader as a profound philosophical insight into the nature of architectural creation itself, yet it is so self-evident that one wonders why the series editors left it intact: "I have always believed that architecture is the remodelling of existing circumstances" (185).

Odder still, and yet more pretentious, is *Vancouver*. The city itself is quite possibly the most architecturally interesting in Canada. Situated between mountains and ocean in a northern rain-forest climate, Vancouver has many neighbourhoods, buildings and gardens that are unique and memorable responses to the weather, the quality of light and local building materials, as well as reflective of the social conditions of a large, multicultural, Pacific Rim city. Yet, aside from a brief mention of the use of glass and wood by Soules in his afterword (182), the reader gleans little of what sets Vancouver apart from other Canadian cities. Similarly, in all three sections (preface, central portfolio and afterword) the respective authors repeatedly assert the *newness* of the "emerging city" (9), notwithstanding Vancouver celebrating its 120th anniversary in 2011. Weder's preface begins with an account of a street riot by disenfranchised citizens in 1971 (15) and seems to assert this event as a starting point for Vancouver's history of social housing. In fact, affordable housing activism in the city can be dated a half century earlier to the Great War era. Most troublesome though, is the portfolio of entries written by MacDonald (and presumably Gillies). Entry after entry is composed in such a plodding, convoluted and overwrought manner that the effect is to take the beautiful images of buildings and gardens (or "amenity landscapes" as MacDonald calls them) on one page and bog them down on the opposite page with descriptive texts that are barely comprehensible. What, for example, is to be made of this entry on "Bruce Ericksen Place" (a social housing mid-rise in the Downtown Eastside, designed by Henriquez Partners for the Main and Hasting [Sts.] Building Society, 1995):

In a city only recently constructed and often of fragile material substance, the question of how to perpetuate collective social history is challenging. In the context for this project for social housing, the challenge is amplified since the history being recalled is devoted not to those who exercised authority over the construction of the city, but rather those who interceded in the human dimension of its daily life. The naming of streets, public parks, and in this instance a building providing social hous-

ing all contribute to projecting some common sense of history forward—with architecture’s role in this oftentimes ambiguously positioned.

This project builds with generosity, presenting a sense of dignity to the realm of the street that shelters the daily communion of its inhabitants. It also works creatively with what might otherwise become paternal agencies of public art provisions and governing space standards to ensure that significant past contributions to the community are remembered. (40)

The above citation was randomly chosen for this review, for *Vancouver* is filled with such entries—and this in a guidebook aimed at the average reader. It is difficult to pin down precisely just what has gone off track with such writing, for this is not discursive prose—but it is certainly not the stuff of poetry, either. MacDonald’s style throughout the book does as much disservice to Vancouver architecture (and Vancouver city) as it does to the reader; page after page brings to mind the dismissive phrase coined by Martin Amis, the British-American literary critic, when he called such writing a “tizzy of false artistry” (1986: 63). MacDonald’s text succeeds in making Vancouver boring, *Vancouver* wearying and architectural awareness something of a gruelling endurance test.

By contrast, the reader can learn more about Bruce Eriksen, both man and building, from a brief, anonymous “Wikipedia” entry than from this book.⁷ Since MacDonald, *Vancouver*’s primary author, is an experienced public educator at UBC’s School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (including a stint as its Director), entries such as these raise additional questions on the state of architectural discourse in the academies that teach it.

MacDonald is one of six career academics in architecture who have contributed to this series (three of whom are also past Directors of four Canadian university schools of architecture).⁸ That is, half the series’ authors teach the subject at the undergraduate and graduate level. Yet none of the books contains endnotes, bibliographies or suggestions for further reading—a peculiar choice if the intent of the series is to educate and “guide” readers to better understand the buildings and cities around them. However, this decision ultimately works in the authors’ favour, for the contents of *Vancouver*, like those of *Toronto* (and, to lesser extent, *Montreal*) invite unflattering comparisons to other books in this subject area—but a reader would need to know that alternative titles exist. The “Bruce Eriksen” entry alone brings to mind the fact that

some of the best books on Canadian architecture have come from Vancouver. Architectural historian Jill Wade (1994) eloquently discusses the long tradition of Vancouver social housing in her *Houses for All*; the assertion that the city’s architecture is “fragile” would come as surprise to the authors (and readers) of Mustard, Hora and Hansen’s (2003) *Geology Tours of Vancouver’s Buildings and Monuments*; and artist Douglas Coupland’s (2000) *City of Glass* is a masterful demonstration of how to write a meaningful, personal and highly poetic study of Vancouver’s material culture. Above all, the book that is quite possibly the best guidebook within the Canadian canon is *Exploring Vancouver* by architect Harold Kalman, with architectural historian Ron Phillips and architectural writer and photographer Robin Ward. First published in 1974 and extensively revised in 1994, *Exploring Vancouver* is now somewhat outdated, but it remains a model for architectural guidebooks aimed at a general audience, being historically grounded, beautifully designed and written so well as to be both informative and accessible. Many are awaiting the third edition of *Exploring Vancouver*, but *Contemporary Architecture in Vancouver* fails to pick up the gauntlet—let alone acknowledge its existence.

Instead, this series as a whole raises some broader and troubling questions about the emerging state of architectural historiography in Canada. Books like *No Mean City* or *Exploring Vancouver* read in retrospect as labours of love intended for the benefit of readers; the books in the *Contemporary Guidebook* series seem inspired by and intended for something else entirely. Why do these latest books exist? A close examination of the books reveals that, despite their titles and the claims staked out by Dutton and Malkin in regard to “good” city guidebooks, their purpose is manifestly not the accurate depiction of new architecture in three Canadian cities. Nor do these books stand out for their historical accuracy, literary merit or the readerly enjoyment they may provide. *Montreal*’s preface and afterword are cases in point, but so too are the virtual entreties of *Toronto* and *Vancouver*.

While it may be less than fair to critique a series of books on what they do not contain, rather than what they do, one is struck foremost by the curious absence of contemporary vernacular projects. Such buildings and gardens typically comprise perhaps ninety-five per cent of the built environment, including those in contemporary Canadian cities. Vernacular buildings are most often modest

structures, small in scale and designed and built by non-architects, and usually created for their personal use.⁹ Nevertheless, any architectural reference work or city guidebook that overlooks the existence of the vernacular—and does so as thoroughly as do these *Guides*—necessarily presents a skewed misrepresentation of reality. The misrepresentation is physical but also contains a class bias, for the architectural inventories in this series rely solely upon that very small portion of work that is produced by the profession of registered architects and other designers, designed and built for profit: on a monumental scale, with luxurious materials and detailing and in collaboration with property developers.

The books' credits provide some clues to an understanding of this state of affairs. The series is funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council—but also by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada and the Toronto Society of Architects.¹⁰ The purpose of the two latter groups is not to support artistic endeavours (as it is with public arts councils), but to support the architectural profession by accrediting its members and promoting their business interests as professionals. Vernacular designer-builders by definition tend to be excluded from such professional groups, and while this fact may perhaps explain why vernacular buildings do not appear at all in guidebooks funded at least in part by professional organizations, it does not shed light on why all thirteen authors, as well as the publisher, have been remiss in making clear the influences on their architectural choices (aside from a one-line acknowledgement, in six-point type, printed on the reverse of each title page). However, by failing to openly tackle the ethical implications of this funding decision, each author has missed the opportunity to address what consequently appears to be their absence of objectivity toward the architecture of these cities and with it, a lack of scholarly and ethical rigour. Instead, the reader is left with books that have resulted from a systemic conflict of interest over what “contemporary architecture” was chosen to be included from each city—and what was excluded.

Added to this ethical dilemma is that posed by the photographs: Virtually every other architectural guidebook in Canada, prior to the *Contemporary Guidebook* series is illustrated with photographs that are either archival or commissioned specifically for the publication. That is, image content was formerly driven by authors' narratives, resulting

in volumes that illustrate those narrative visions along with the authors' interests, ideas and capacity for independent thinking. Not so in this series. Although it is next to impossible to determine with precision, it appears that *none* of the *Guidebooks'* photographs was taken specifically for the books by their many authors. The photos number more than a hundred in every book, yet their credits are all jammed together on a single page at the very end, again in minute type. There is simply no convenient way for readers to cross-reference image and source, and no way at all to determine if any images were commissioned for this series—or if all were merely extant publicity stills supplied by the design firms cited. Thus the reader is again left with an unfortunate impression in regard to authorial independence: it seems that if no professional firm was involved with an architectural project (as there seldom is with vernacular builders), or if no photos were forthcoming from a professional design firm, then the building in question simply would not be included in the book. To put it bluntly, in the absence of any assurances to the contrary from the books' authors, editors and publisher, it is reasonable to speculate that major editorial decisions regarding what constitutes “contemporary architecture” in these cities appears to have been premised not on the contemporaneity of the buildings, but on the ability (and willingness) of the professional design firms to leverage their way into them.

Adding further to the unease caused by the photographic provenance is that of their pictorial content. All photos (generally building facades) date from the moment of the building's completion. Thus, every site is shown as it existed in a single, ideal moment in its past: at its pristine best, before any natural weathering had occurred, and without any hint of the changes and normal wear-and-tear that comes with urban life and human occupancy over the years. That is, the architectural photos we see in these books are the stuff of advertising copy, and they ought not to be interpreted as depicting the truth of the lived reality of buildings and cities at the time of the authors writing about them. This is no minor quibble: photographs comprise almost one-half of each volume; numerous entries depict “contemporary” buildings that are in fact decades old; and the authors' emphases on monumentality has meant that many of the projects are public, in reality subject to continual heavy use, alteration and deterioration.

The illustrations, then, are evidence that, despite the books' titles, these are not truly

Guidebooks to Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver as they exist at the time of their being written. But neither do they depict the three cities as they existed in any other era. The series is instead composed of catalogues of individual architectural projects as each momentarily existed when it was completed and depicted in the professional portfolios and advertisements of the time. That is, inventories of discrete bits of promotional material have been cobbled together as if each resulting book were a realistic and truthful, “contemporary” representation of each city today.

A careful scrutiny of the images and their credits will lead one first to question—as it relates to this series—the integrity of the authors and editors and, second, raise broader implications regarding the legitimacy of the series’ existence. While these *Guidebooks* are of extremely high formal quality and look very nice, the fact remains that they cannot be relied upon to convey architectural, historical or civic truth. Simply put, the cities in the *Contemporary Guidebooks* never existed as these books depict them, but this is not acknowledged by any of their many authors. Conversely, the few illustrations that do have some potential objective and truth-telling purpose—the architectural plans—seem to be included merely as space-filling afterthoughts. They are virtually incomprehensible, with their small size and with labels and line weights so fine, that they barely register on the page. Being a key pedagogical tool in understanding a piece of architecture, such simple

line drawings can reveal a wealth of information about a building or a site. Given that all the authors are experienced professionals who surely value the worth of a legible floor plan or section in the imparting of information about a building, this editorial decision reconfirms unsettling questions about the very *raison d’être* of the *Guidebook* series.

In short, these books cannot be considered as architectural reference books or city guidebooks in the traditional, realistic and truth-depicting sense of the word. While useful tidbits of data can be gleaned from individual photo captions in the portfolio sections, the series as a whole seems intended less to educate and “guide” a popular audience to understanding and appreciating contemporary buildings and cities, and more to serve as promotional vehicles for real estate developers and the architectural and landscape designers who work for them, albeit with a gloss of artful prose and intellectual pretense. This would go some way to explaining the absence in the series of not only vernacular structures and builders, but also that of bibliographies. Directing readers to read and think more about buildings and cities is not the goal of this series, for to do so would invite comparisons, inevitably unfavourable, between it and the vast historiography of scholarly and popular books on Canadian architecture, garden design and urbanism—the contemporary, the monumental and the high-style as well as the historical, the small and modest, the time-worn and the vernacular.

Notes

1. Published simultaneously by les presses de l’université de Montréal as *Guide de l’architecture contemporaine de Montréal* (ISBN 978-2-7606-2075-9) (not reviewed).
2. Cartography is by Eric Leinberger (*Montreal*), Flavio Trevisan (*Toronto*) and Heather Maxwell (*Vancouver*).
3. For *Montreal* the provenance is stated as, “Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs were created by the architects themselves or commissioned by each firm” (191) and for *Toronto* and *Vancouver* as, “Unless otherwise indicated, the photographs were created by the architects, landscape architects, planners, and urban designers or were commissioned by each firm” (191).
4. Quoted from on the title page of *Vancouver*. The extent of Gillies’s contribution, however, is unclear: Her name is absent from the front cover and the official bibliographic record in Library and Archives Canada’s Cataloguing-in-Publication data on the reverse of the title page, notwithstanding it appears on the book’s title page—albeit in grey type rather than in black (as is MacDonald’s name). To confuse matters further, she has been excluded from the biography list of author and editors on the inside of *Vancouver*’s back cover.
5. twitter.com/shawnmicalef (accessed March 8, 2012).
6. See third edition revised by Stephen A. Otto with an essay by Christopher Hume (2003).
7. Bruce Eriksen (1928-1997) was a child labourer, sailor, logger and dockyard worker-turned-artist, community activist and member of Vancouver City Council, as well as the common-law spouse of Libby Davies, Member of Parliament for Vancouver East. He was a tireless advocate of safe, low-income housing. To cite one example, his role in improving municipal fire-code provisions in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside is estimated to have saved 25-40 lives per year since 1973. His accomplishments inspired a stage play and a radio play, as well as Bruce Eriksen Place, a 35-unit apartment building notable for its spaciousness, natural light and the use of a public art on the entrance cornice and on each apartment balcony. See http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Erikson (accessed March 8, 2012).
8. In addition to MacDonald at UBC, contributors include Castro (McGill University) and Richards (Universities of Toronto and Waterloo). Given the preponderance of university professors among the contributors to the series, similar questions necessarily arise that pertain to the current state of architectural education in Canada. These are beyond the scope of this review.
9. See Glassie (2000).
10. This information appears on the reverse of the title page in all volumes.

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